



826michigan: How a robot store gets kids hitting the books

By Andrew Schulman
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When LSA junior Alyssa Selasky rhapsodizes about the kids she tutors, she recalls how second grader Melanie stealthily guards her yo-yo and how seventh grader Justin pulls pranks to postpone the inevitable opening of his backpack.

Then, just before her gaze begins to wander, a broad smile spreads across her face and she begins to narrate breathlessly.

She does this repeatedly throughout our interview, barely containing how much she loves her job.

In fact, she's worried her enthusiasm might come across as overkill.

But it's as sincere as the longing expression on her face that seems to say, "Please let me get back to doing what I love to do. Please."

Selasky is a tutoring intern at 826michigan, a nonprofit writing and tutoring center. It may be an internship, but Selasky doesn't fetch coffee.

Infectious enthusiasm

Selasky and I met for the first time in 826's woody tutoring room.

She filled most of the 45-minute conversation with anecdotes, telling me about the in-school residency writing program that paired her with third graders at Mitchell Elementary School in Ann Arbor.

"It was the highlight of my week," she said of the residency program, which she participated in last year. "Thursday mornings I was glad to wake up at 7:30 to make it to this third-grade class by 8 o'clock because they were just so much fun."

At first, she said these weekly trips were the reason she fell in love with 826.

But later in our conversation she pointed instead to field trips as the reason she continued working at the center after her volunteering ended. For two hours each Friday morning, local teachers bussed their classes to 826michigan for writing events.

"Those are hard to talk about and really convey how much fun and how exciting they are," she said. "Maybe field trips are how I got roped in, not my in-school residency."

Then, realizing that she had contradicted herself, she smiled and swung her arms out, seemingly gratified by her indecision.

A (fittingly) literate history

In 2000, the author Dave Eggers was living in Park Slope, Brooklyn, something of a nest then for aspiring writers and literary types. Entering his third year as the editor of McSweeney's, a literary magazine that had not yet blossomed into the eminent publishing house it is today, he was in the midst of writing his first book, "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," published that year.

He was also nurturing the seedling that gave rise to 826 National, the umbrella organization to which 826michigan and its six sister centers belong.

While he was mingling with fellow writers, he was contemplating the shortcomings of urban public schools with some of his college friends who had become teachers.

The solution, to somehow link his writer friends with the struggling school children, was right there.

What was missing was a conduit.

He found that conduit in 826 Valencia, the street address of the building in San Francisco's Mission District that Eggers opened in February 2002 to house his first tutoring center and the headquarters of the burgeoning McSweeney's.

Eggers, his McSweeney's staff and a few local volunteers plied in the back of the building, inviting students to join them.

When Eggers's landlord told him the Valencia building was zoned for retail, Eggers installed a "pirate store" at the front of the building, specializing in "scurvy-be-gone" eye patches and other buccaneer memorabilia.

But for all of Valencia's promise of improving students' writing, they didn't hurry in. Eggers soon determined that 826 Valencia was suffering from a trust gap. Here he was, hoping to lure kids into tutoring with a pirate store, and nobody even knew the tutoring was happening.

Gerald Richards, 826 National's CEO, likened it to a stranger proposing to sell kids ice cream.

But finally news of 826's programs spread. Students rushed in, their parents struggling to nudge them past the miniature planks for hamsters and back toward the workshops.

The store, once a liability, was now winning kids over by the dozens.

With help from the storefronts, very consciously designed, to meet the community on the street, 826michigan's Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair (see side box), 826DC's Museum of Unnatural History and 826NYC's Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co. are all doing just as well as the San Francisco location.

"It wouldn't be 826 without some sort of front-facing, strange, magical, surreal place that is a Bigfoot research center or a space travel store," Richards said. "It has to have the quirky, interesting, different, front-facing piece of it, because I think that is the thing that draws in everybody."

But Richards said that the store façade's main function is to "de-stigmatize" tutoring, to foster a sphere wholly apart from, and even somehow polar to, the classroom.

"The kids, when they say they're going, they're not like, 'I'm going to get tutoring,' " he said. "It's like, 'I'm going to 826. I'm going to the pirate store,' or 'I'm going to the superhero store.' "

Ann Arbor-bound

When 826michigan opened on June 1, 2005, 826 Valencia was thriving and Eggers had unwrapped two more 826s, in Los Angeles and Brooklyn.

But in Ann Arbor, the organization faced a similar crisis of credibility. Few teachers in the area had heard of 826, and those who had were skeptical that the organization could offer anything more than what students received in the classroom.

That started to change when 826 employees started visiting classrooms, according to

826michigan's executive director Amanda Uhle.

"In almost every case we would go into one classroom because one teacher really believed in us and was really excited," Uhle said. "And then it didn't take long for the other teachers to be like, 'Well, wait a minute, this looks like it's pretty helpful and pretty good.'"

The extra "something" is 826's emphasis on creative writing.

Steven Gillis, the novelist who opened 826michigan in 2005, said he believes students who cannot write proficiently are "lost."

"A lot of kids fear the blank page," he said. "A lot of kids think they can't write or have trouble reading. And if you can't read and write, everything just falls apart."

826michigan, as a feature of its philosophical culture and its mission statement, strives to prevent that falling apart. The 2,330 students it helped last year span the literacy spectrum from English-as-a-second-language learners to adept writers who simply need a community to debate whether "serene" or "tranquil" is the better word to use in their short story.

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"What we're trying to tell them is, as long as you're writing, you can't do anything wrong," Amy Wilson, 826michigan's communications coordinator, said. "So much of it is just having somebody to say, 'Wow, you're doing really well,' and, 'This is really cool,' and, 'Maybe let's add onto it in this way.'"

Wilson, who graduated from the University in 2010, is gregarious and somehow motherly. She sat back as I asked her whether students seemed to at least appreciate writing more once they had dropped in for after-school tutoring or took part in an in-school program. She smiled, said she had seen students growing more "fluent" with language, and then paused.

When she started speaking again, she had whirled herself into one of 826michigan's most beloved stories. A few years ago, the center's program director, Amy Sumerton, was struggling to inspire a particularly averse fourth or fifth grader to write.

"And slowly, slowly he was making progress," Wilson recalled, "and then he came in one day and he said, 'Amy, I'm so glad you're here. There's this question I've been wanting to ask you all week. Is there such a thing as too much narrative tension?' This is an eight-year-old student who had been forced to write in his journal before. And that's amazing. We love that story."

A classroom adventure

Janet Popper, a third grade teacher at Haisley Elementary School in Ann Arbor, was among 826michigan's early advocates.

Popper graduated from the University in the 1970s and has enjoyed writing ever since a nun read her essay aloud when she was in middle school. She's been taking her students on field trips to 826michigan for several years now and returned Jan. 13 with about 25 students.

The students filed in and sat around the tables in 826michigan's tutoring center while the staff fired up a PowerPoint presenting a story. The story went like this: Katie, a two-headed dragon, had stolen the fabulous Popper Diamond, and Jacques, a robot, his genius sidekick Evan, and Owen, chief of police, had been charged with tracking it down. They do so, cornering Katie the dragon in a cave, where she confesses she has been stealing ever since she lost her favorite toy when she was young.

Just then, a voice blasted out of the 826 staff's computer. Calling from an Estonian castle — "definitely not Skyping in from the basement downstairs," Selasky, the tutoring intern, cautioned me on one of my earlier visits — was the villainous Dr. Blotch.

Dr. Blotch was a 212-year-old Louisiana resident who owned a booger ranch in Brazil. He hated children and hated their stories even more, approving of none of them and rejecting

1,300,454,556,553. But he was demanding 200 pages from Popper's class in an hour, promising none of their endings to Jacques, Evan and Owen's lark would earn her approval.

Dr. Blotch then signed off, and the students began scrawling furiously. A few bandied about possible endings with one another, imagining stories of redemption for Katie or heroics for Evan, but most were silent, crafting their most daring endings and then drawing the scene on a separate cover page.

Popper, who'd been observing from afar in the back of the classroom, leaned toward me and explained that the enthusiasm and freedom of 826 is what keeps her coming back.

She pointed to a student she identified as the quietest in her class and told me she'd seen her hollering and laughing throughout the 826 visit.

She looked across the room at the kids, their heads down in a study of their creative work.

"They're all engaged," Popper said. "This is engaged learning. That's why I come, right there."

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